

Sermon 6/12/16

The Presumption (and Exchange) of Good Will

I had a client I'll call Natalie, who wanted to spend her appointment time grouching. She came to me for a service I call "Life In Perspective" sessions, where I combine a straightforward intuitive assessment of self-imposed obstacles on one hand, and self-hypnosis advice or mental techniques to overcome them on the other. It can be a tough-love interaction, but for those clients who appreciate a no-nonsense, take-charge approach, these sessions give them clarity, direction, and usable techniques to embark on the changes they want. It's a two-part approach to putting one's life in perspective; defining the real problem and getting down to the nuts and bolts of fixing it.

The first time we met Natalie began with her litany of complaints. All the reasons life was just beating her up. She couldn't catch a break. Her boss was against her at her civil service job; the union wasn't helping her. She had a neighbor who disrespected her, a mechanic who was ripping her off, and ongoing feuds with various services like ConEd and the Post Office.

I interrupted her after about ten minutes to turn the topic to good will (of which she had very little), because I could see how her lack of it was contaminating her work, her relationships and her mental health.

Natalie insisted she was filled with good will, and that OTHER people who didn't have it were the problem because their ill will drained her good will.

So defensive was she that she presumed ill will on the part of most people she encountered. The driver beside her who drifted into her lane was exhibiting road rage, for example. When someone interrupted her they were trying to show that she was stupid. Any woman who engaged in even the most casual greeting with her husband was a potential interloper trying to steal away her man. She even found ill will in the weather! It rained on an important day and so the climate was against her.

Natalie saw every encounter as a challenge to her very state of being. And furthermore, she'd convinced herself that this is normal. Life is about fending off challenges and emerging a stronger person. "Forewarned is forearmed" was her motto.

Lest you might think she had a victim mentality, let me be clear about this. Natalie didn't feel that the world was against *her*, or that she was beaten down. She felt that the world was against everyone, no one -- not even the weather -- could be trusted. So she went about her business armed to the teeth. Verbally stabbing back whenever she felt any trespass or challenge -- and she felt almost EVERY encounter to be a trespass or challenge.

Natalie was no victim, nor could we call her aggressor. She didn't step off with hostility. But she certainly had a ready trigger finger. But not a victim. On the contrary, she saw herself as a very

powerful woman, one who'd built up the necessary reserves of strength and assertion to protect and defend herself in a world distinctly canted towards evil.

Natalie is a Christian woman. Now, I'm pointing this out only because she felt that Satan, whom she called The Enemy, was operating through all of those encounters. The Enemy looked for weak souls, like a lion picking off the weakest antelope in the herd. Because Satan goes for the low-hanging fruit. It was Natalie's belief that God made the world this way: forces of Evil always out there battling forces of Good. We were supposed to watch out for sin and expect that those evil forces were a constant temptation.

So she had an expectation that the stronger she got, the better a person she became, the more the Enemy would try to reduce her. And she saw The Enemy in everyone but more poignantly, she saw the Enemy in every shadow, anticipated the Enemy around every corner. The more she prepared to do battle, the better she resisted, the stronger she became, the more she ensured the salvation of her soul.

I don't mean to describe Natalie as pessimistic or a doomsday-er, either. She saw the presumption of ill will as a necessary shield against malicious and purposeful attacks AND as a safeguard against the perils of life in her human community and in nature. She even pointed out to me what she called the cruelty of nature.

Natalie was surprised that I wanted to direct her first steps towards the topic of good will. She didn't consider that her defensive technique was an obstacle to anything -- she saw instead that it was a sign of her strength and resiliency. She even felt she was more intuitive because she anticipated challenge and was frequently validated by her experience. Of course when we anticipate something we usually turn out to be correct. But is that intuition? Not always. Whether you call it the Science of Mind, the law of attraction, or self-fulfilling prophecy, the evidence shows us that what we anticipate and expect is what comes to our door.

What is good will? It's a state of both feeling and action. Feeling that defines action maybe: benevolence, kindness, friendliness, charity and easy-going forgiveness. Being considerate and cooperative. A kindly feeling of approval and support; cheerful consent; willing effort.

It's a unique state because it's action and reaction simultaneously. It's both noun and verb. It's given and received and these dual states inform each other. Good will, ultimately, is a choice in how we present as well as how we receive interaction.

Now, Natalie came to me for a Life-In-Perspective reading as I mentioned. She wanted the right kind of mental techniques to get her fledgling business off the ground. As far as she was concerned, she needed only habit change: overcoming procrastination, defining and setting goals, having the stick-to-itiveness to carry on over the slow start up period.

So you can imagine that she was somewhat bewildered by my focus on good will. But I could see that as long as Natalie felt her power was in strength-to-resist, she couldn't redirect her energy to strength-to-build. She was flexing her muscles in fending off and unable to simultaneously flex her gathering muscles.

We can't push away and draw towards at the same time.

We see this sometimes in the political field. For example, last year as President of my Library Board we introduced a petition to move the budget decision from the Town Board of five, to a referendum whereby all the town residents could vote on the budget. There was a small very vocal minority (the CAVE people) who didn't want to see this happen, and this group caused no end of trouble.

With lies artfully crafted into soundbites, they began a smear campaign against not only me, but the Library itself. Things like: the Library is sitting on \$4 million dollars. Priscilla is lying to you. They aren't being truthful about the money they have.

I spent all summer last year correcting these accusations, and because the CAVE people weren't really interested in answers or information, I wasted a huge amount of time, which would have been better spent promoting all the wonderful things about the library. For various reasons we didn't pursue that referendum last year, but we are this year. The CAVE people are out already with their same sound bites that get picked up and repeated because they provoke peoples' anger, but I'm ignoring it.

I'm not going to expend my resources on a defensive strategy because it's going to take my resources from a promotional strategy. And if I'm so busy ducking accusations, ill will, I'll never get my head up to get my message out and draw towards me the good will we need, the good will I KNOW is out there. And that's a tactic, make not mistake about it.

This summer I'm presuming good will on the part of the residents. I've made the decision to ignore the ill will and presume friendliness, kindly feelings of support, cooperation, and consideration. It's already working. People are already coming up to me and offering their help.

When Natalie was in my office I turned the topic to the presumption of good will because I knew it would build the groundwork for so much other positive change. I asked her to spend the next couple of weeks changing her mind with self-hypnosis. That she would come to see and expect the cheerful willingness of friends and strangers alike.

We met once more for a follow-up visit and Natalie had definitely done her homework. She sat down and right away began a litany of her successes, as opposed to her gripes, in stark contrast to the first time we met.

Not only was she presuming good will in others, but that naturally enhanced her patience with herself. By expecting cooperation from her printers, her landlord, and the other drivers on the road, Natalie also found she wasn't fighting herself. In every way she was softer, warmer, more engaging... and it evoked good will in ME. I wanted to help her. She was so prickly before, that if I'd met her on the street she'd be one of those people I'd have wanted to avoid. Someone I'd roll my eyes at if I had to interact with her.

So I submit this to you, too. It's natural to feel that we're challenged. We may be hard-wired that way from our evolution or it may be how we were raised. I know so many people whose default mode is distrust. Or who write off an entire set of behaviors because it went badly for them once. When I lived in the City for years I was close friends with a woman who wouldn't even tell me her boyfriend's name because when she was 17 her older sister stole her boyfriend. Decades later she wouldn't allow her sweetheart to be in the presence of any woman she knew, whom she thought was attractive. Wouldn't even say his name. And we were in our forties!

If you see yourself in Natalie or any of these examples I've shown today, consider good will as a starting point to change. You're not letting your guard down; you're trusting in God to guard you, as He promised all of us He would do. Presuming good will allows you to see the Divine in others, and that is the basis of all connection and all beneficence. We're all connected anyway. When you choose to presume that your neighbor or the nice lady talking to your husband has good intentions, you get to experience God's love -- or as close as we humans can get to it.

And whenever we focus on God, good things happen.

Amen.